

Memorial Day 2004



World War II National Monument

HRSCNE DIRECTOR'S MEMORIAL DAY SPEECH *

MAY 26, 2004

On March 19th 2003 we engaged Iraq and the regime of Saddam Hussein in battle, and shortly thereafter defeated his forces. We then began the work of installing the institutions of self-government while, at once, rebuilding the infrastructure of that country. We have paid a severe price for the effort. Over 750 of our armed forces have been killed and thousands have been wounded. This is our fifth commemoration of Memorial Day at the HRSC/NE. But it is the first in which we include in our thoughts large numbers of present day battlefield losses.

It is a difficult time for our country, made more difficult by critics who are ever present and feel compelled to inform us that these losses are not sacrifices, they are merely waste. To be sure, many of those criticisms are offered honestly, are based on deeply held convictions, and must be respected. But others are more cynical, seemingly meant to deliberately inflict pain. People who have contempt for our patriotism, and ridicule the notion that America is a great, moral and selfless nation offer these criticisms.

One such critic is Crispian Sartwell, the chair of humanities and sciences at the Maryland Institute, College of Art in Baltimore, who recently published an article in the Philadelphia Inquirer entitled "The Things America Stands For." America, he said, has "an overwhelming legacy of cruelty, torture, domination and genocide." Regarding our

professed nobleness of spirit he responds that Americans are a "cruel and greedy" people and he admonishes us "to cease propping ourselves up with self-delusion" and "gaze at the heart of our own darkness." Mr. Sartwell has an M.A. from Johns Hopkins University, and a Ph.D. from the University of Virginia. He has taught Philosophy at the University of Alabama, Vanderbilt, and Penn State. He is apparently a well-regarded member of academia, he has all of the scholastic credentials in the world, and this is what he passes on to us as useful criticism.

It is easy to feel a sense of anger in the face of such a withering and uncompromising attack on our national character, but it is better to simply take up his challenge and look carefully to find the darkness in our hearts. So, let us ask the hard question: Why then we in Iraq and why have we lost these good men and women on the field of battle? Is it for greed? Dominance? Genocide? What, in short, have we actually accomplished by going there?

First, we ended the regime of Saddam Hussein who systematically tortured and murdered Iraq's citizens. Dozens of mass graves have been found in which the bodies of over 400,000 murdered Iraqis were buried. He used chemical weapons to gas and kill 50,000 thousand of his own citizens in the North. He drained and set on fire the Iraqi Marshlands and thereby drove 300,000 of his countrymen into refuge camps. In doing this he changed the fertile marshland area that was their home into a salt encrusted wasteland. He attempted to poison the environment of the world by setting massive oil well fires before he departed Kuwait in 1995. And having surrendered and agreed to a ceasefire after the first Iraqi war, he then attempted to assassinate our former President. He is a hardened criminal, as mad as Caligula, and he is gone now because the United States of America confronted him.

We also ended any threat that Saddam Hussein would develop and secretly release WMD to attack this country through terrorist networks. Should there be a release of such a weapon in a highly populated area, we would be facing 100,000 dead. Of course, we now know that "no WMDs were found", but the issue is not quite that simple. It is true that in his final report, David Kay, the Head of the UN Inspection team, satisfied us that he did not find stockpiles of these weapons. But he did find chemical and biological weapons systems, plans, formulas and equipment ready for conversion into new production. He found multiple strains of biological weapons agents for use in current research. He found on-going work in Iraqi labs on anthrax, ricin and other bio-toxins. He found buildings for biological weapons testing on humans. He found banned long-range ballistic missiles suitable for delivering those biological and chemical agents. David Kay indicated in his report that what he found was in many ways more frightening than what he had searched for. But the threat that Saddam Hussein may produce and release these devastating weapons is gone now, because the United States of America confronted him.

Having won the war, we did not simply depart and walk away from the ensuing chaos. In the aftermath of the war we have stayed, in part to act in response to our instinctive humanitarian impulses. Our military has improved the quality of daily life in Iraq. Our soldiers have renovated 2500 Iraqi schools with another 800 soon to be finished. We have delivered 9 million textbooks on math and science to Iraqi children. 32,600 Iraqi

teachers and 3,000 Iraqi teacher-supervisors have now been trained in classroom management and classroom technique. The United States Marine Corp has served as the key player in creating these improvements.

Health care has now been opened to all Iraqi citizens. For every dollar spent per year on the health care of Iraqi citizens during Saddam's regime, we are now spending \$700. New and modern drugs and children's vaccinations are now stocked in Iraqi medical clinics. The 82nd Airborne Division introduced these important changes.

Our armed forces have sponsored magnificent accomplishments in the areas of basic human rights, the Iraqi infrastructure and the Iraqi economy. 120 newspapers are now published in Iraq, internet cafes are springing up and access to the internet and cell phone networks are now common, oil production is exceeding pre-war levels by ½ million barrels a day, electricity is now on for 16 hours a day - a 40% improvement from pre-invasion levels, clear fresh water is now brought to 15 million Iraqis who had none previously, sewage systems are now repaired and Baghdad airport is now generating 43 passenger flights per day. And yes, the United States of America is now in the process of restoring the Arab Marshlands. To date 40% has been re-flooded.

Many of our soldiers have died in combat in Iraq but many others have died at the hands of snipers and suicide bombers while providing these improvements to the Iraqi people.

So we search, and we search hard, but we search in vain to find the self-delusion, the greed, the domination, the genocide, the so-called darkness in our hearts that Mr. Sartwell has alluded to? But, let us probe deeper, for we have not discussed the true meaning of the vile conduct of our soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison.

Mr. Sartwell is very clear on the implications. About this incident he says that, "we offer ourselves once again as a beacon to a benighted world", but with a little more honesty we would realize that this is "who we actually are". It is a dark and frightening thought, except that it is contradicted by a different, unreported story about that prison, one that reflects more accurately the true American temperament.

In 1995 Saddam arrested 9 Iraqi businessmen to serve as scapegoats for his anti-Americanism. The nine receive a 30-minute trial and then were sentenced to one year's imprisonment at Abu Ghraib prison. They served their time but then, immediately prior to their release, each of the nine had his right hand amputated as a final punishment. The amputations were videotaped. The surgeries were deliberately botched to ensure that the remaining nerve endings were untreated so as to cause constant post-operative pain at the site of the amputation. And as a final indignity, an X was carved in each man's forehead to mark him permanently. This perverse use of medicine to deliberately dismember and disfigure Iraqi citizens was a common practice under Saddam.

The videotape found its way to Doctor Joseph Agris, a Houston reconstructive surgeon, by way of an American TV producer in Iraq, Mr. Don North. Upon reviewing the tapes, Dr. Agris responded that if those men could be located, he would restore them.

Seven were located. And by then, America's instinctive sense of justice and compassion had been aroused and it was ready to act.

It is not easy for Iraqi citizens to depart Iraq because of security concerns. But Paul Bremer, our representative there, wrote a memo authorizing their immediate departure. Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz then provided an Air Force plane to fly the men to Frankfurt, Germany. Homeland Security waived their visa requirements. Continental Airlines donated transportation from Frankfurt to Houston. Doctor Agris and an assistant surgeon, Dr. Fred Kestler, donated their surgical services. Houston's Methodist Hospital donated its facilities. The surgeries were performed. Another inch was removed from the stumps to allow for the repair on the nerves, and the development of a smooth surface, which allowed for the attachment of new prosthetic hands. Those "hands" were \$50,000 each, but a German-American company, Otto Bock, donated them. They are state of the art. The men are now in Houston spending five hours a day learning how to use their new right hands, and that work on rehabilitation has been donated by two Houston companies, TIRR and Dynamic Orthotics. Oh, and one last thing, the disfiguring carvings on the men's foreheads have been removed.

Doctor Agris, now plans to fly back to Iraq with the men in order to set up a clinic to repair the damage inflicted on others in Saddam's dismembered population.

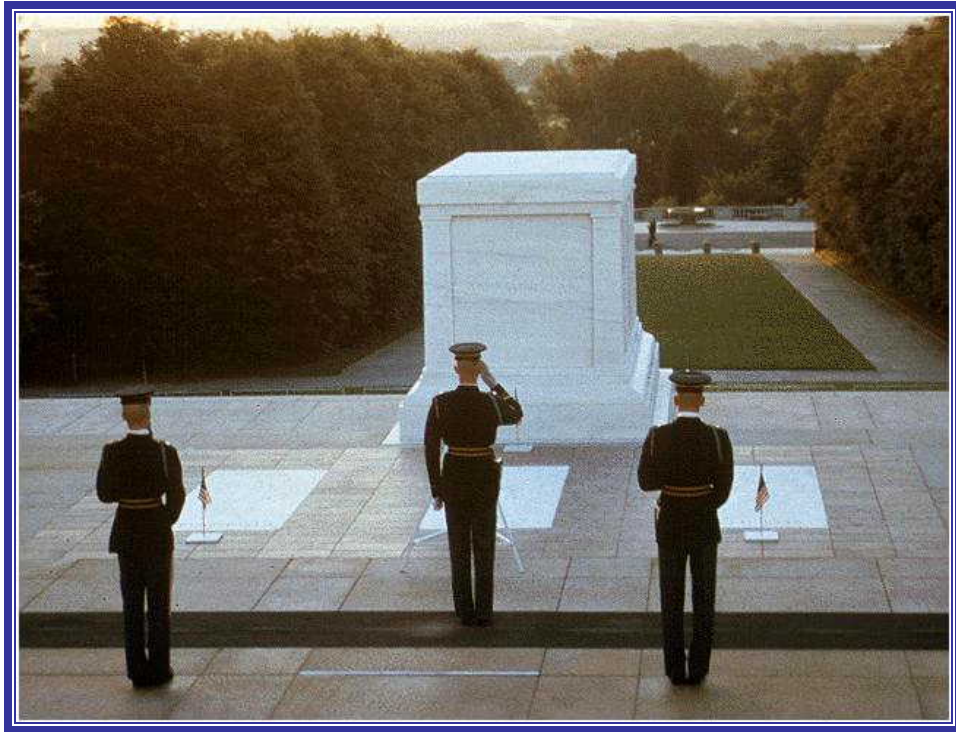
The man who started all of this, Don North, has now produced a documentary of these events. But no one in this room has seen it. The American and International media that have broadcast the photos from Abu Ghraib every day for the past three weeks, that provide a readily available forum for the slanderous comments of Mr. Sartwell and others like him, have not found the hour necessary to broadcast Mr. North's documentary. His work would be an elegant testament to the generosity and the humanity of the American spirit, but his work remains hidden from our view.

We are an honorable nation, the very best the world has to offer, and the men and women in our armed forces are honorable people, deserving always of our respect and gratitude. The American military is guilty of only one crime in this war, and that is the crime of not being perfect. And so again, as we do each year, we gather today to remember, respectfully, our fallen heroes and to express our deep love of this great country.

Please join me in a moment of silence to honor the memory of those we have lost in the Iraqi war.

Thank you. And, in accordance with our tradition, will you all please stand and join me in reciting our pledge of allegiance.

* Please note: The information regarding our accomplishments in Iraq is based upon the reporting of Mr. C. Wallace on *Fox News Sunday* of 9 May 2004. Mr. D. Henninger in the *Wall Street Journal* of 21 May 2004 reported the information on the restoration of the prisoners' amputated hands.



Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

“It is rather for us the living, we here be dedicated to the great task remaining before us - - that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion - - that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom, an that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

Abraham Lincoln
The Gettysburg Address delivered on November 19, 1863